

WHOSE REVOLUTION? PROFESSIONALISM, BUREAUCRACY AND
SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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SUMMARY OVERVIEW

New conditions will be needed to enable many more people to gain decent and sustainable rural livelihoods in the 21st century. Normal professionalism, bureaucracy, careers and learning present obstacles. They miss or harm much that matters to the poor. They tend to centralisation, standardisation, reductionism, regulation, and hassle and rent-seeking. Professionals often have short time horizons - economists through discounting, officials through financial year targets, and commercial interests through profit maximisation, in contrast with the long time horizons of many poor people when they can invest securely in the future. To support sustainable livelihoods, it is often reversals that are needed of what is normal, reversals to decentralisation, diversity, complexity, deregulation, freedom from hassle and rents, and long time horizons.

Compared with structural and organisational points of entry, those which are methodological and personal have been neglected. Recent developments with participatory rural appraisal (PRA) in South Asia and elsewhere show promise. When rapport, methods and materials are right, rural people, including the poorer and the illiterate, have demonstrated a greater creativity and capacity to map, model, diagram, rank, score, quantify, analyse, plan and take command of resources, than outsiders have believed possible. This finding supports the quiet personal revolutions which are increasingly being experienced, though still on a small scale, by people in the professions and organisations concerned with rural development.

The R and D frontiers indicated are themselves changing rapidly. For the moment, they include further work on approaches and methods for a. participatory appraisal, analysis and action, b. training and personal change, and c. institutional change in professions and bureaucracies, all of these linking with the creation and support of conditions for more sustainable rural livelihoods in the future.

Sustainable Livelihoods for the 21st Century

The context is familiar and can be stated briefly and badly. Population projections for the 21st century have risen. The populations of low income countries are now projected to rise from 2.9 billion in 1988 to 5.2 billion in 2025 (World Development 1990:228). Many of the additional 2.3 billion people will live in misery in towns and cities. Many will have to find their living in rural areas. The more who live in rural areas, the less will be the pressure on the towns. At the same time, the exploitation of rural resources is currently quite often

unsustainable. Any strategy for environment and development for the 21st century which is concerned with people, equity and sustainability has, then, to confront the question of how a vastly larger number of people can gain at least basically decent rural livelihoods in a manner which can be sustained.

This has two linked dimensions. Some unsustainability results from the greed and shortsight of the rich and powerful. The solution here to change the behaviour of the rich and powerful, including professionals and bureaucrats. Some unsustainability also results from the survival strategies of the poor. The solution here is empowering the poor in a manner which encourages and enables them to take the long view, to enhance and not degrade resources and to resist the rich and powerful. This paper tries to explore some ways in which these various conditions can be achieved, including new promising developments in South Asia.

The Normal as Problem

A prudent start is to examine ourselves, as observers and developers of "them", and some of the normal errors associated with our professionalism, bureaucracy, (successful) careers, and styles of learning. Normal professionalism, bureaucracy, careers and learning are usually regarded as part of the solution. The argument here is that they are often much of the problem.

Normal professionalism, meaning the concepts, values, methods and behaviour dominant in professions, tends to put things before people, men before women, the rich before the poor, and the urban and industrial before the rural and agricultural. It values and uses precise measurement more than judgement, and methods which are often reductionist. In agriculture, reductionist research tends to generate packages in controlled conditions, and to ignore and fail to serve complex, diverse and risk-prone farming systems.

Normal bureaucracy is hierarchical and tends to centralise, standardise and regulate. Field bureaucracies in the South often extract rents from the poor by exploiting rules and regulations, and demanding payments for services rendered. Their time horizons are usually short, bounded by targets for the financial year.

Normal (successful) careers related to rural life start in the periphery (though not some World Bank and other donor careers which start and stay in the cores), and then move upwards in hierarchies and inwards to larger and larger urban centres. Those who end up in powerful policy positions tend to be ageing men whose direct personal experience of rural conditions is out-of-date.

Finally, normal learning is from "above", from teachers, authorities, and urban centres of knowledge, and not from "below", from rural people and conditions.

These four forms of normality interlock and reinforce each other with tendencies to centralise, standardise, simplify, and regulate, to have short time horizons, to be out-of-date, and to try to transfer technology from controlled to uncontrolled conditions. They fit into the blueprint model of development, planned from the top down.

Most of these points may now be well enough accepted among enlightened development academics and practitioners, but some of the reasons for their misfit with the conditions and needs of poor people and vulnerable environments are perhaps less fully appreciated. These include that:

- * diversity and complexity in rural livelihoods and conditions are underperceived and hence underestimated by outsider professionals. Reasons include the biases of rural development tourism, the de facto reductionism of survey questionnaires (with their preset categories, and the incentives to investigators and respondents to keep answers simple and short so as to finish sooner), the failures to notice and investigate microenvironments (Chambers 1990a), the focus on cash crops, major food crops and large livestock, and the neglect or failure to notice practices of the poor such as share-rearing, and the use of common property resources (Beck 1989).

- * poor people often seek to do better by complicating and diversifying their livelihoods, especially in slack seasons

- * outside irrigated "green revolution" agriculture, and where topography is uneven and rainfall irregular, farming systems are made more stable and sustainable by diversifying, complicating, and intensifying activities, and by multiplying internal linkages, not by standardising to uniform packages of practices (Chambers 1990b)

- * hassle and rent extraction by officials are widespread and deeply resented. (One of the findings, across countries and across cultures, of the United Nations University programme in some 18 countries on Rapid Assessment Procedures for primary health care was that "rudeness on the part of government health services staff was a deterrent to the use of services in most of the communities studied" (Scrimshaw and Hurtado 1987:2)). In India, bribes are standard for a great many government services.

- * poor people need and want to take the long view, and usually do when they can, but outsider professionals

often take the short view (through discounting, targets for financial years, and profit maximising)

There is thus a misfit between top down, standardised, simplified, regulated and short-term blueprinting, and the needs and desires of the poor for diversified, complicating, unregulated, flexible, and long-term processes of adaptive behaviour.

Reversals as Solutions

Solutions can be sought in reversals. In brief summary these are:

- * from centralisation to decentralisation, from top-down to bottom-up
- * from standardisation to differentiation and diversity
- * from reductionist simplification to holistic complication
- * from regulation to deregulation and freedom from hassle and rents
- * from learning from above to learning from below
- * from priority to things to priority to people, and from men to women, and from the rich to the poor
- * from short to long time horizons.

This last deserves elaboration. The challenges are two. The first is to change professional values and methods, and especially to offset the effects of discounting. Future historians may wonder with amazement at the resilience, or perhaps inertia is a better word, of the methods of discounting in an age when the environment and sustainability are so high on the agenda. By undervaluing the future, discounting conflicts with common sense and responsibility for the future generations who so enormously outnumber us. The second challenge is to create conditions which encourage and enable poor people to take the long view, and to invest in sustainability. For this they need secure rights. With these, they often behave in ways which manifest a long view, for example building up terraces, sequentially creating structures to harvest soil, water and nutrients, creating other microenvironments, and planting trees for future generations. Poor people are, in this respect, less of a problem than normal professionals and business people.

The reversals listed may appear the fond fantasy of a unreconstructed idealist. In practice, however, many changes in the direction of these reversals have occurred, and are occurring. In India, for example, decentralisation, destandardisation, differentiation and

diversification have occurred already in canal irrigation, social forestry, watershed development, and agricultural research. Nor is it a question of absolutes, of slot-rattling from one extreme to another, but rather of seeking balance by weighing in on the neglected side of the scales.

The Competence and Creativity of Rural People

The potential for reversals is indicated by experiences in Sub-Saharan Africa and most recently in South Asia (India and Nepal) with the outgrowth of rapid rural appraisal (RRA) now known as participatory rural appraisal (PRA). This has shown that rural people have capabilities for mapping, modelling, ranking, scoring, quantifying, seasonal analysis, causal and linkage diagraming, analysis and planning which few outsiders, apart from a handful of social anthropologists, can have suspected. A mass of evidence is now available (see e.g. IIED 1988- and PALM 1990-) but only a small fraction of the experience gained is being reported in an accessible form. Examples include:

- * participatory mapping and modelling, including mapping of natural resources, land productivity mapping, social mapping, census mapping, health mapping....
- * participatory transects, walking systematically through an area, observing, discussing and identifying problems and opportunities
- * matrix ranking and scoring, in which people rank and score items (trees, fodder grasses, soil and water conservation methods, fuels, varieties of a crop, political leaders...) according to their own criteria
- * causal, linkage and relationship diagraming, in which people draw systems and linkage diagrams, for example as recently in India and Malawi and elsewhere to diagram the nutrient flows within a farming system (Lightfoot 1990)
- * seasonal analysis, in which people use seeds or other counters, and break sticks or straws into lengths, to rank, score and quantify conditions which vary seasonally such as agricultural labour, income, expenditure, taking debts, food availability, and diseases
- * wealth and well-being ranking and analysis, in which people rank households according to their own concepts of wealth or well-being, and then indicate the criteria underlying their decisions

What all these have shown is that conditions for the expression of people's knowledge and creativity have to be favourable. In the past, this has rarely been the case. Four conditions are essential - rapport, restraint, methods, and materials. Good rapport, of the

sort where the outsider shows humility, respect and interest in learning from the rural person, and listens and does not lecture, has been rare; outsiders have been taught and trained to believe that they know best. Restraint in interviewing has not been part of standard training, yet for these participatory methods one hard lesson to learn is how not to interview, how not to interrupt, and how not to dominate: the key here is to learn how to encourage and allow those who are no longer respondents but players, presenters and performers, to concentrate, create and consult among themselves. Regarding methods, the right ones have been little known, or only recently rediscovered or invented and the power and popularity of their practice, and of sequences of them, little realised. Finally, the right materials - chinks, coloured powders, seeds of different sorts, and so on - have been available but rarely seen as things to have ready for the processes of presentation and analysis.

When these conditions obtain, people have shown themselves capable of presenting, checking, enhancing and analysing their knowledge in ways which have exceeded expectations, and which have sometimes been astonishing. The puzzle is how we have failed to realise all this earlier. Part of the explanation may lie in the arcane, esoteric and inbred communications of anthropologists, who have known some of this but not realised or communicated its significance and potential. In part, too, explanations may be sought in our own behaviour, lecturing and not listening, confident in the superiority of our knowledge and technologies for transfer, and which have induced rural people to present themselves as deferential, ignorant and incapable. How misleading that impression has been is now evident: rural people often have extensive and detailed knowledge, and in contrast with the reductionism of much modern science, they often have a mastery of complex criteria and detail.

The Primacy of Personal Behaviour

The normal reflexes of reformers are structural, legal and/or procedural: structural reformers seek to create new organisations or departments, or to change their internal shape; legal reformers seek to change the law, as with land reforms; and procedural reformers seek to change the way things are done. All can be valid and useful. But all neglect the primacy of the personal behaviour. It is what people do which determines what a new structure in practice achieves, whether and how laws are enforced, and whether and how procedures are implemented. People's (professionals', bureaucrats') interests, incentives, competence and commitment or lack of commitment are critical for outcomes. Yet curiously, outside of education, psychologists are one of the rarest, if not the rarest, of professions in development,

and most training does not confront questions of personal perceptions, orientation and behaviour.

Methods and behaviour present promising entry points for change. Methods can require people to behave and to gain experiences which in turn change their perceptions and values. Examples include undertaking village tasks, with villagers as teachers, and matrix ranking and scoring in which the procedure forces the questioner to elicit the criteria and judgements of the respondent. Training in India pioneered by James Mascarenhas of MYRADA and Sam Joseph of Action Aid has had a style of temporary total immersion in village conditions. The combination of methods, immersion, and collegiality with peers and villagers, has enabled many people to move towards reversals. The power and popularity of methods of PRA have also led to spontaneous spread, and to many demands from Government organisations for training. It is much too early to know the full potential of these approaches and methods, but the experience has been positive to date, justifying rapid further development. Reforms which are structural, legal or procedural may then receive a new impetus from personal change and commitment.

R and D for "Our" Revolution

The revolution needed is less "theirs" than "ours". It entails reversals in professionalism, bureaucracy, careers and learning. It fits and supports a paradigm for future society and development which values the three Ds - decentralisation, diversity, and democracy - a pattern being discussed and sought increasingly in the North as well as in the South. Paths towards such conditions are many, but the analysis and assertions above point towards the importance of approaches, methods and behaviour, and so of methodological R and D.

Methodological R and D has been a Cinderella in rural development. Research has been thought of as finding out, development as doing, and R and D as developing technology, usually of a physical or biological kind. Development professionals have tended to be one or the other - either academic researchers, or practitioners. But inventing and testing new methods requires straddling between the R and the D. Who is best placed to initiate and support such work? Given the professional conservatism found in universities, it may well be that the centres of innovation will and should remain in the NGO sector. An institution in the North - the International Institute for Environment and Development - has played a major part in developing and legitimating agroecosystems analysis, RRA and PRA. Increasingly, though, as in India, it will be Southern NGOs that take the lead. The model of R and D that serves best may well itself be decentralised, diverse and democratic, encouraging many flowers to bloom. But if so, there will be key roles in assessing, recording and communicating

experience, in exchanges of persons between NGOs, and in training, and some comparative advantage there may continue to exist in the North. The biggest opportunity and challenge, though, will be change in government organisations in the South, including the field bureaucracies of agricultural extension, health and forestry.

At a time of widespread questioning of professional values and behaviour, and of accelerating personal and professional change, such R and D attracts only a small proportion of development professionals, but that itself is rapidly changing, as more and more realise the potential and excitement of the field. Methodologically, the 1990s may set a pattern for much of the 21st century. Robert Rhoades has written about the coming revolution in rural research. But what is occurring is more than that: it is a quiet revolution not just in research, but in professional and bureaucratic values and behaviour.

In the light of all the above, the priorities which emerge are R and D on approaches and methods for:

a. participatory appraisal, analysis and action

b. training and personal change

and c. institutional change in professions and bureaucracies

all these being directed towards generating and supporting the conditions for many more sustainable livelihoods in the future.

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